

LABEL HOLDER FOR MOIST ENVIRONMENTS

This is a complete application claiming benefit of provisional application Serial No. 60/433,982 filed December 18, 2002 and application Serial No. 60/437,263 filed January 2, 2003.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

This invention relates to merchandising aids, and relates more particularly to a label holder to be used in moist environments such as deli or meat cases or fruit and/or vegetable cases. Such label holders are usually designed to removably receive non-adhesive labels to display consumer information such as descriptions and prices of products, as well as inventory control information such as barcodes and the like. In some instances, the label holders can be combined with a sign holder adapted to carry a "flag" or sign displaying special information to the consumer such as identifying a "sale" item or the like. However, a particular problem exists when a label holder is to be used in a location subject to significant amounts of moisture such as the condensation commonly found in chilled displays of deli and meat cases or displays of fruits and vegetables which are sprayed from time to time to keep the products fresh. In such environments, water can enter the label holder, damaging the labels and providing a site for bacteria or mold to grow, an unsightly condition at best, and a dangerous condition, particularly in the vicinity of fresh food.

Discussion of the Related Art

“C-channels” are commonly found in merchandise outlets such as supermarkets or the like, and are formed with spaced upper and lower opposed lips to provide a convenient means for mounting many different kinds of fit-in articles, such as labels, label holders, signs or sign holder
5 which provide information relating to merchandise juxtaposed thereto. While adhesive-backed labels can be secured directly to a supporting surface or even directly on the surface of a C-channel, removing such labels is time consuming and difficult, leaving an unsightly residue build-up. For many applications, therefore, non-adhesive paper or plastic labels are preferred since they can easily be replaced if they become damaged or the product information changes. While such non-adhesive
10 labels can sometimes simply be fitted directly between the lips of the C-channel, more commonly, label holders are provided which have a back or body panel attached in some fashion to the supporting surface, with a transparent cover member flexibly secured along one mating edge to the body panel to define between the front surface of the body panel and the rear surface of the cover member a pocket for removable reception of one or more such information-containing labels.

15 Label holders are generally provided in elongated sections, perhaps 4' or more in width, and may be secured by adhesive strips or the like to any supporting surface. However, for most applications, such label holders are designed to be fitted directly in a C-channel of a product display shelf or a case or bin containing products. Various prior art embodiments of such label holders can be seen in commonly assigned U.S. Patent Nos. 4,713,899, 5,458,307, 5,488,793, 5,682,698,
20 5,899,011 and 6,105,295. A particularly desirable label holder having a “lockable” cover feature designed to secure and protect the labels within the pocket is seen in U.S. Patent No. 5,515,632 (the

'632 patent). The disclosures of all of the foregoing patents are incorporated herein in their entireties by reference.

Sometimes, in addition to the information provided by the product labels, it is desired to highlight certain information about a particular product or group of products by displaying an enlarged "flag" or sign. Different forms of "sign holders" are also well known in the merchandising art, examples of which can be seen in the aforementioned U.S. Patent No. 5,488,793, as well as commonly assigned U.S. Patent Nos. 4,485,575, 4,531,313, 4,625,441, 4,704,813, 4,917,342, 4,995,182, 5,682,698, and 6,163,996, the subject matters of which are also incorporated herein in their entireties by reference. As seen in some of the aforementioned patents, such sign holders may be designed to be supported partially or entirely in the same C-channels as the label holders. A combination label/sign holder adapted to support multiple sign holders of various forms directly on the cover of a label holder, permitting access to labels carried by the label holder pocket without removing the sign holders, is disclosed in commonly assigned, U.S. Patent No. 6,568,112 granted May 27, 2003 (the '112 patent), the subject matter of which is incorporated herein in its entirety by reference.

Regardless of the specific nature of the label holder or label/sign holder, prior art label holders, as seen in the '632 patent and the '112 patent, have an upwardly and outwardly extending flange carried by the top of the cover panel member adapted to facilitate releasing the "locking" engagement of the cover member with an overlying lip carried by the top of the body panel when it is desired to place or replace labels in the label holder pocket. While such a construction is highly desirable in many applications, it has been found to be a source of contamination when the label

holder is used in a moist environment since it tends to collect moisture which can flow back into the label holder pocket as discussed above. Moreover, label holders of this nature can permit water to enter the label holder pocket from the sides providing additional sites for the growth of mold or bacteria.

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SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

A primary object of this invention is to provide a label holder for use in moist environments which precludes the entry of water into the label holder pocket.

10 A further object of this invention is to provide a label holder, which may or may not incorporate sign holder-receiving lip members and/or a sign holding grip integrally formed on its cover, but which includes an outwardly and downwardly extending ledge element at the top of the cover member designed to channel moisture from above over the front of the label holder away from the label holder pocket.

15 A still further object of this invention is to provide a label holder which incorporates sealing means at least at the side edges of the label holder pocket to further preclude the entry of water into the label holder pocket.

20 Yet another object of this invention is to provide a label holder which includes a layer of a resilient material such as rubber or a closed-cellular foam plastic at least at the side edges of the label holder pocket, such as strips of such material on each side edge adhesively or otherwise affixed to the body panel or the cover member to seal the side edges against invasion of moisture or water.

Still another object of this invention is to provide a label holder of the type described wherein an entire layer of, for example, a closed-cellular polyurethane foam is co-extruded on the inside of the body panel to provide a sealing surface limiting the entry of moisture into the label holder pocket. As a variation thereof, this invention provides for the body panel itself to be formed of the closed-cellular foam material or the like which sealingly engages against the co-extruded transparent cover member.

Other and further objects of the instant invention will become apparent from the ensuing description and claims read in conjunction with the attached drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

The accompanying drawings, which are included to provide a further understanding of the invention and are incorporated in and constitute a part of this specification, illustrate embodiments of the invention and together with the description serve to explain the principles of the invention.

Figure 1 is a perspective view of a prior art label holder as seen in the '632 patent;

Figure 2 is an enlarged perspective view of one embodiment of a label/sign holder according to this invention with portions of a sealing tape along the side of the label holder pocket shown in dotted lines;

Figure 3 is a perspective view, partially broken away for illustrative convenience, of one embodiment of the label/sign holder of Figure 2 mounted in a C-channel with the outwardly and downwardly extending ledge element along the top of the cover member directing moisture or water down and off the front of the label holder; and

Figure 4 is a view similar to Figure 2 of a modified label/sign holder according to this invention.

Like reference characters refer to like part throughout the several views of the drawings.

5 **DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS**

Figure 1 illustrates a prior art label holder as seen in the '632 patent. This prior art label holder 100 include a back or body panel 112 flexibly secured at its lower end to a transparent cover member 114. A rearwardly and downwardly extending leg 116 is attached to the rear of the body panel 112 and is adapted to engage in an upwardly opening pocket in a lower lip member of a C-
10 channel (not shown in Figure 1), the barb 118 engaging in a downwardly opening pocket of an upper lip member of the C-channel to secure the label holder 100 in use.

A downwardly extending flange 120 on the top of the body panel 112 interacts with a downwardly extending flange 126 on the top of the cover member 114 to effectively "lock" the cover member 114 in its closed position to preclude accidental loss of paper or plastic labels (not shown)
15 carried within the pocket formed between the front of the body panel 112 and the rear of the cover member 114. In the prior art label holder 100, an upwardly and outwardly extending flange 128 is provided to facilitate disengaging the locking interaction between the cover member 114 and the body panel 112 when it is desired to open the cover member 114 to access the label holder pocket for removal or replacement of labels therewithin. As will be seen, however, the flanges 126, 128
20 together define a channel which tends to hold moisture in a wet environment. Such moisture can ultimately feed back along the flange 126 into the label holder pocket damaging the labels and

providing a site for contamination by mold or bacteria. Water can also access the label holder pocket in such a prior art label holder from the unsealed sides.

In contrast, reference is now made to Figures 2 and 3 wherein, one embodiment of a label/sign holder according to this invention is illustrated at 10. The label/sign holder 10 is similar to one of the embodiments seen in the '112 patent, with the exception of the means provided by the instant inventive concepts to preclude environmental moisture from entering the label holder pocket. The merchandising aid 10 includes a label holder portion 15 formed by a back or body panel 16 and a cover member 18 flexibly secured to each other at a hinge or pivot portion 20. Except as discussed below, the material from which the merchandising aid 10 is made is not critical to the instant inventive concepts, although, commercially, such products are co-extruded from plastics materials, with the body panel 16 being formed of an opaque plastic and the cover member 18 being formed of a transparent material to enable passers-by to view information on one or more labels (not shown) captured in a pocket 26 formed between the front surface of the body panel 16 and the rear surface of the cover member 18. The cover member 18 can be tipped forwardly to facilitate the insertion or removal of a label from the pocket 26. The resilient nature of the hinge 20 will then normally bias the cover member 18 back toward its closed position.

In the embodiment shown in Figures 2 and 3, the upper edge portions of the base panel 16 include a forwardly and downwardly extending flange 32 and the upper edge portions 34 of the cover member 18 are lockingly engageable under the flange 32 to retain the cover member 18 in its closed and "locked" position and thereby secure labels in the pocket 26, particularly in the event the resilience of the connection between the base panel 16 and the cover member 18 weakens with

continued use of the label holder 15. In accordance with this invention, a forwardly and downwardly extending ledge member 36 is carried by the upper edge portions 34 of the cover member 18 in lieu of the upwardly and outwardly extending flange 120 of the prior art label holder 100, to thereby direct moisture down and off the leading edge 36a over the front of the label holder portion 15 and away from the label holder pocket 26.

The manner in which the merchandising aid 10 is secured to a supporting surface will vary depending upon the nature of the supporting surface itself as will be readily recognized by those with ordinary skill in this art and is not a critical part of the instant invention concepts. Reference may be had to the leg 116 and the barb 118 of the label holder 100 of the '632 patent as seen in Figure 1 or to the '112 patent for several embodiments of such mounting means. In Figures 2 and 3, one embodiment is illustrated in the nature of a generally vertically extending rear panel element 70 attached by a horizontal element 72 to the rear of the base panel 16 of the label holder portion 15, the upper and lower edges 70a, 70b of the rear panel element 70 being snappingly engaged between the upper and lower lips 74, 76 of a C-channel 78 such as seen, for example, in Figure 3. This particular means for supporting the label/sign holder 10 is shown simply for illustrative purposes to emphasize the many ways in which the merchandising aid of this invention can be secured to a supporting surface.

The instant invention provides significant advantages when used with a label holder devoid of means to carry additional flags, signs or notes. However, as seen in the '112 patent and as shown in the drawings hereof, the cover member 18 of the label holder portion 15 may carry a sign holder such that the label holder can be opened without removing the sign holder. To that end, a pair of

sign holder-receiving pockets 50, 52 may be integrally formed on the cover member 18, i.e., by extrusion. In this instance, the upper sign holder-receiving pocket 50 may be formed by the forwardly and downwardly extending ledge element 36 designed to cause water to run down and off the face of the cover member 18, the lower sign holder-receiving pocket 52 being formed by a lip member which extends forwardly and upwardly from the lower edge portions of the cover member 18.

A well-known spring clip form of sign holder (not shown) includes a spring plastic or metal element having oppositely extending edge portions adapted to be snappingly engaged in the sign holder-receiving pockets 50, 52 respectively, in an obvious manner. Alternatively, a sign holder of the type seen in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,682,698 or 6,163,996 (not shown) can be secured in the pockets 50,52 of the cover member 18 in a well known manner. An additional upper grip member 55 may be provided behind the ledge element 36, the upper grip member 55 being closely positioned to the upper edge portions of the front face of the transparent cover member 18 to define between them a small pocket 56 adapted to slidingly receive and removably retain by friction the upper edge portions of an additional label, sign or the like (not shown) in a well known manner.

It will now be seen that the ledge element 36 not only forms the upper sign holder-receiving pocket 50, but directs moisture such as condensation in a deli or meat case or water that may be sprayed on fresh fruits or vegetables from entering the label receiving pocket 26 from above and thereby damaging the labels or contaminating the area around the food products by permitting the build-up of bacteria or mold. Moreover, by downward and inward or, more likely, upward and outward pressure on the ledge element 36, the cover member 18 may be released from its

engagement beneath the flange 32 to enable the cover member 18 to be tipped forwardly to insert or remove labels from the pocket 26.

According to another feature of this invention as seen in Figures 2 and 3, the label holder pocket 26 may be further protected from entry of moisture by adhesively or otherwise securing a thin strip 60 of any resilient rubber or polymer material, such as closed-cellular foam polyurethane, to the front surface of the body panel 16 or the rear surface of the cover member 18, or both, at each side of the label holder portion 15. One such element is seen in dotted lines in the drawings.

While the strips 60 will function effectively to seal the side edges of the label holder pocket 26, affixing these strips in position may be difficult to do in a continuous manner and, therefore, would be labor-intensive. To overcome that problem, a modified embodiment of the instant inventive concepts is shown in Figure 4 wherein parts similar to the embodiment of Figures 2 and 3 are designated by the same reference characters followed by a prime ('). In the embodiment of Figure 4, in lieu of the strips 60 of resilient material, a continuous layer 80 of, for example, a closed-cellular foam material, is co-extruded to be integral with the polymer of the body panel 16. Thus, the label/sign holder 10' of Figure 4 is actually a tri-extrusion: the material of the body panel 16' and the mounting elements being formed of a first, generally opaque, polymer material; the material of the layer 80 being of a second, resilient, polymer material; and the material of the cover member 18' being of a third, transparent, polymer material. With such a construction, there is no need for the labor-intensive adhesive sealing of strips such as shown at 60 in Figures 2 and 3 at each side edge of the label holder pocket 26' since the resilient nature of the layer 80, itself, acts to seal the label holder pocket about each of the labels carried therein.

It is also possible for the body panel of the label/sign holder itself to be formed of a resilient material such as a closed-cellular polyurethane foam or the like to provide a similar function. This would avoid the need for side strips and for a separate co-extrusion of a resilient layer.

Although Figures 2-4 illustrate the instant inventive concepts in a combination label/sign holder such as seen in the '112 patent, it is to be understood that these concepts are equally applicable to a simple label holder of the type seen in Figure 1 and that, while the combination label/sign holder has significant advantages discussed in the '112 patent, the instant inventive concepts are not uniquely applicable to such a construction.

The foregoing descriptions and drawings should be considered as illustrative only of the principles of the invention. As noted, the invention may be configured in a variety of shapes and sizes and is not limited by the dimensions of the preferred embodiment. Numerous applications of the present invention will readily occur to those skilled in the art. Therefore, it is not desired to limit the invention to the preferred embodiments or the exact construction and operation shown and described. Rather, all suitable modifications and equivalents may be resorted to falling within the scope of the invention.